

Remarks During a Meeting With Western Governors on Wildfire Prevention and Response Efforts

June 30, 2021

[The President's remark were joined in progress.]

The President. —proud of our Cabinet. And they're all here today. They all want to be engaged. They all want to help. And so, hopefully, we're going to get into some exchanges going down the line here.

I want to thank you all again for being in the support meetings. So thank you, thank you, thank you. And, Governor Newsom, you trying to make us feel bad, listening in that magnificent background you have over there—*[laughter]*—and while I'm sitting in here in the White House? God love you. Anyway, it's good to see you all, really. Thank you.

For years, the President has received a briefing at the beginning of the hurricane season, looking at the trends that are coming to get a sense of what's coming so that the country can be better prepared.

And when I received that briefing this year, I asked for a second briefing that does the same thing, but now we're doing it about wildfire season. And we know this is becoming a regular cycle, and we know it's getting worse. In fact, the threat of western wildfires this year is as severe as it's ever been.

And I wanted to convene this group of Governors—of western State Governors, key members of my Cabinet, FEMA leadership, and the leadership from utility industries, and senior members of our White House team to make sure we're doing everything—and I mean this sincerely—we're doing everything possible to help you prepare for what's coming, and some is already there.

The truth is, we're playing catch up. This is an area that has been underresourced, but that's going to change, if we have anything to do with it. We can't cut corners when it comes to managing our wildfires or supporting our firefighters. And this briefing is going to be an annual event to make sure we're focusing on preventing fires—the fire threats in the first place—as well as responding when they arise.

But right now, we have to act and act fast. We're late in the game here. We're remembering the horrific scenes from last year: orange skies that looked like end of days; smoke and ash that made the air dangerous to breathe; more than 10 million acres burned; billions of dollars in economic damage; families that lost their homes and everything they own; and too many—too many—lost lives.

And this year, we—they could be even tougher, based on the weather patterns. You know, California and some other places, the drought conditions are twice that's—what they were last year. And right now, we're seeing record heat in Portland and across the West.

And this *[last]** year, you know, 21 large, uncontained fires were burning. This year, there are 36 that are uncontained and burning. There are already about 9,000 firefighters deployed across the region—from California to New Mexico, to Utah and Nevada—and it's only June. I

* White House correction.

know—I realize I'm preaching to the choir here. I know you all know this better than any other people in the country.

Fire season, traditionally, lasts through October. But with climate change—climate change driving the dangerous confluence of extreme heat and prolonged drought—we're seeing wildfires in greater intensity that move with more speed, last—you know, and lasts well beyond traditional months—the traditional months of the fire season. And that's a problem for all of us.

Wildfires are not a partisan phenomenon. They don't stop at a county or a State line—or country line, for that matter. We need a coordinated, comprehensive response with all the Federal working—all the Federal Government working in close cooperation to support you, the States. That's what this is about. We want to know what you—the States and localities and Tribal governments and those in the frontlines—are facing in this danger and what you think would help the most.

Today we're taking critical steps to help protect American communities right away. First, we're going to make sure that we have enough firefighters on call who are trained, equipped, and ready to respond for all this fire season. And we're going to pay them. They—I mean, the idea these folks are running into—anyway, we should pay them.

Last week, I learned that some of our Federal firefighters are being paid less than \$13 an hour. Come on, man. This is—that's unacceptable to me. And I immediately directed my team to take decisive action to fix it.

So today we're announcing what I still think is not enough: This year we're going to provide retention incentives that's going to ensure Federal wildland fires are—firefighters are making at least \$15 an hour and provide for additional 10-percent bonuses for those working on the frontlines.

But a one-time boost is not enough. These courageous women and men take an incredible risk of running toward the fire, and they deserve to be paid and paid good wages. You know that old expression: "God made man. Then, he made a few firefighters"? Well, it's true. They're incredible. I've spent a lot of time, my whole career, with them.

So we're going to work with Congress, and I know many of your Senators and Representatives have been working hard on this for—to permanently get Federal firefighters a better deal, including improvements in their compensation, their benefits, and their work-life balance.

The Federal Government is also offering funding, when Governors request it, to train and equip National Guard members so they have a—they're ready to provide a surge of firefighting capacity.

You know, one of the things I learned over the years, being so deeply involved with the firefighters, is the only thing that saves a firefighter's life is another firefighter. That's the single most consequential thing.

And you know, one of the hardest speeches I've ever had to make—and you've all—we've all made difficult speeches—was at the funeral of the 19 Granite Mountain Hotshot firefighters, when the Prescott, Arizona, Fire Department got clobbered. That tragedy happened 8 years ago today. That's the reason I mention it. It's hard to remember—of all the costs that firefighters risk when they do their job and their bravery to step up and do the job.

Now, traditionally, Federal firefighting has been a seasonal job, but because of climate change—and I know you all know it, and I hope your constituents know it: There is climate change—it's no longer a seasonal job. This is a year-round mission.

So we've made sure seasonal firefighters can stay on the job, as long as they are needed this year, by allowing them to work beyond their term. And for next year, we're working to make more than—of those positions, permanent positions so that when fires aren't burning, we have a workforce of experienced hands enhancing our forest management, reducing the risk of future fire in the future fire season.

Second thing: We are harnessing new tools and technologies to better identify and respond before new fires grow into large, uncontrolled conflagrations. So, for example, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA, has satellite technology that is able to see from space when new fires start, while they're still small, even as small as the size of your dining room table.

Similarly, the Department of Energy has a sensor array computer analysis capability that can detect in real time the lightning strikes that might set off a blaze. And we're going to use those tools to identify fires that start in remote places and share that information so the firefighters on the ground can respond immediately before a fire has spread out of control. I know that's not a full answer, but it's real. It will improve things.

And we're also going to make sure that the people have a—the information to better protect themselves and their families from smoke and fire risks. This will include launching a new app on—from EPA, so individuals can easily access the latest information on air quality, smoke plumes, and public health guidance.

Third, we also have to make investments in our future. That's why the bipartisan infrastructure framework investment of about \$50 billion in the—my so-called—anyway, I won't go into it. But a bill that's caused a little attention—infrastructure bill—is going to build resilience to extreme weather events like wildfires—\$50 billion.

And today I'm announcing a \$37 million Federal grant to Sonoma County, California, in support of fire mitigation efforts that are underway. This grant is part of FEMA's BRIC program, Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities. My administration doubled BRIC funding to support local efforts to strengthen resilience. And because Sonoma knows all too well the devastation wrought by fires, they were the first to apply for fire mitigation funding. I encourage more communities to do so next year.

And finally, I want to note that the extreme heat we're seeing in the West is not only a risk amplifier for wildfires, it's a threat in and of itself. People are hurting. It's more dangerous for kids to play outside. Roads are buckling under the heat. I need not—again, I need not tell all of you.

We need people to check on their neighbors, especially seniors who may need a helping hand; outdoor laborers, like our farm and construction workers, are going to need frequent water breaks and shade. I want to thank the Governors and local leaders for providing information to citizens and the resources like cooling centers where people can go to get relief from the heat.

And to our utility leaders: We are ready to work with you to make sure that people have the access to power, including air conditioning, under these extreme demand conditions while continuing to advance our climate goals.

Now, I'm eager to hear from each of you—each of the Governors—as to what the experience has been in your State and what we can do better to be helpful. Because this is an area where investing in prevention and preparation today is going to deliver invaluable returns tomorrow. And the Federal Government is going to have to do—have your backs. And that's going to—that's my intention.

I'll close by just saying thank you to everyone from the Forest Service, to the Department of Interior and Agriculture, to FEMA, to State and local and Tribal partners, and most importantly, our firefighters for all your incredible work. We've asked so much of the firefighters already, and I know you're going to continue to step up.

Now I'm going to ask Vice President Harris to say a few words, and then we'll move on. Madam Vice President, the floor is yours.

Vice President Kamala D. Harris. Thank you, Mr. President. First, I just want to thank the President for prioritizing this for his administration.

[At this point, the Vice President continued her remarks, concluding as follows.]

And the bottom line is that: As the President has said, his bipartisan framework for infrastructure is going to address a lot of these challenges. But there is other work to be done, and so I look forward to staying in touch with all of you. And again, thank you for your leadership.

The President. Well, thank you.

Governor Brown, if you'd be willing, you could give us an overview of what you—the challenges are you western Governors are facing and what you think we should be doing and can do to help. I—the floor is yours.

Governor Kate Brown of Oregon. Thank you so much, Mr. President and Madam Vice President, for having us here for this incredibly important conversation.

[Gov. Brown continued her remarks, concluding as follows.]

And then, finally—and I just have to say, gratefully—our Good Neighbor Authority—we have partnered with the Federal Government over the years to reduce wildfire risk on Federal lands through collaborative processes, including prescribed burns, removing dead trees and underbrush. With the recent passage of our State legislation, we have an opportunity to fund even more of these Good Neighbor Authority projects together. It's a win, win, win. It creates jobs, creates healthy landscapes, and reduces wildfire risk. And we have the dollars to invest now.

So we look forward to partnering for you—with you, and we are incredibly grateful, Mr. President, for your leadership.

Back over to you.

The President. Well, Madam Governor, I'm not being solicitous when I say we're grateful for your leadership. I really mean it.

And one of the things that I'd like to ask before we move on is: What would you be looking for us to do at the Federal level to strengthen this agreement to build off the lessons that—you know, the Good Neighbor agreement? And is there anything in particular that is—you've learned from last season that would be—add to the needs of this season?

Gov. Brown. Well, you mentioned it in your remarks, Mr. President: Making sure we have resources to train our National Guards men and women prior to fire season has been extremely helpful the last two fire seasons. This should be universal practice nationwide. It's incredibly helpful. We have relied on our National Guard every step of the way throughout the pandemic, and we certainly rely on them in support activities and firefighting.

The other piece—and I see Chief Christiansen there—in terms of the Good Neighbor Authority, this has been extraordinary in our ability to put people back to work in our timber-dependent rural communities, in our ability to create healthy landscapes, in our ability to provide timber for the mills, and frankly, our ability to reduce wildfire risk.

And so more resources to collaborate and provide what you describe as "comprehensive, collective efforts" to reduce wildfire risk would be extremely helpful.

The President. Well, we ought to get—not in this moment—but we're ought to get, no pun intended, deeply in the weeds as to specifically what can be done.

And I'd ask my appropriate Cabinet members to be working with your people as to what we can do along those lines because it seems to be self-evident that that makes a lot of sense.

And—but we have a lot of other things to cover here, but I look to Dr. Sherwood: Are we moving to——

Homeland Security Adviser Elizabeth D. Sherwood-Randall. We're going to move shortly. If you want to ask any further questions of Governors, and we can move, with the press departing, and we'll continue our discussion.

The President. Let me ask the Vice President if she has any questions and/or any Cabinet member if they have any questions for the Governor.

Vice President Harris. What I'm interested—it's really a follow-up to what the President asked: What—with each consecutive wildfire season—and they are growing in terms of the enormity—what are we learning? And how can the Federal Government address the challenges and the gaps that you have seen with each fire season, in terms of the resources, but also the approach?

And—for example, including the public education piece; including the piece that is about encouraging the private sector, where appropriate, to be engaged around resilience and adaptation. On the issue of water policy, what kind of resources do you need that are also preventative as well as reactive to the wildfires themselves?

Homeland Security Adviser Sherwood-Randall. Governor Newsom, do you want to pick that one up?

Governor Gavin C. Newsom of California. Yes. Well, first, if I could just make a little indulgence—and thank you, Madam Governor and Madam Vice President—Mr. President, I've been waiting almost, well, 4½ years to hear a President say what you just said.

[Gov. Newsom continued his remarks, concluding as follows.]

And I just want to say we respect and appreciate your leadership, and we're just grateful and humbled that you took the time today to be with all of us.

The President. Well, look, Gov, this is a—I'm not doing anybody any favor. I just think if—if I were sitting in your seat or Governor Brown's seat, what I'd be—I mean, this is urgent.

And one of the things that I have found since becoming President is how often I'm required to call in the National Guard.

Vice President Harris. Yes.

The President. The National Guard. I spent yesterday—well, that's not true—2 days ago—meeting with our military. What they've done is just astounding. I just met with the general who had coordinated probably the largest effort to—the largest logistical effort in American history getting all these COVID vaccines out.

I mean, think about what—how we're relying on the military in ways we never, ever, ever anticipated. And now I got my briefing at NOAA on what was going on in hurricane season. And it's, you know—and we're looking for the National Guard there too.

And so we just have to think differently, like you all have been talking about. And I promise you, when we get down to the nitty gritty—and a lot of this we're already getting down there—you got to tell us what you need. And we can debate it. We can discuss it.

And I think this is a—you know, that old overused expression—a "wake-up call" to the rest of the public, who all of a sudden is saying—I've had people say to me, when I've been on the road the last month—less than that; probably the last 3 weeks—"Oh, my God. I didn't think things were really changing that much. I saw those—those photographs of the reservoirs in California, and—oh, my God—they're really—there's no water?" Or people saying, "A hundred and seventeen degrees and—you know, in Portland?"

So I think this is both—you know, the old expression—we've got to make lemonade out of lemons here. We have a chance to do something that not only deals with the problem today, but allows us to be in a position to move forward to make and create real good jobs, by the way, generate economic growth in all the process.

So thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:11 a.m. in the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham of New Mexico; Gov. Stephen F. Sisolak of Nevada; Gov. Jay R. Inslee of Washington; Gov. Mark Gordon of Wyoming; Gov. Spencer J. Cox of Utah; Gov. Jared S. Polis of Colorado; and Operation Warp Speed Chief Operating Officer Gen. Gustave F. Perna, USA. Gov. Brown referred to U.S. Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen.

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